



A red surface with a fine woven texture. Two circular holes are punched through the material, one on the left side and one on the right side. A small, irregular tear or hole is located near the top center. The lighting creates highlights along the edges of the holes and the surface.

**Air Supplied**  
**/ David Cross**

**PUMP /**

































Coca-Cola

Farmacia











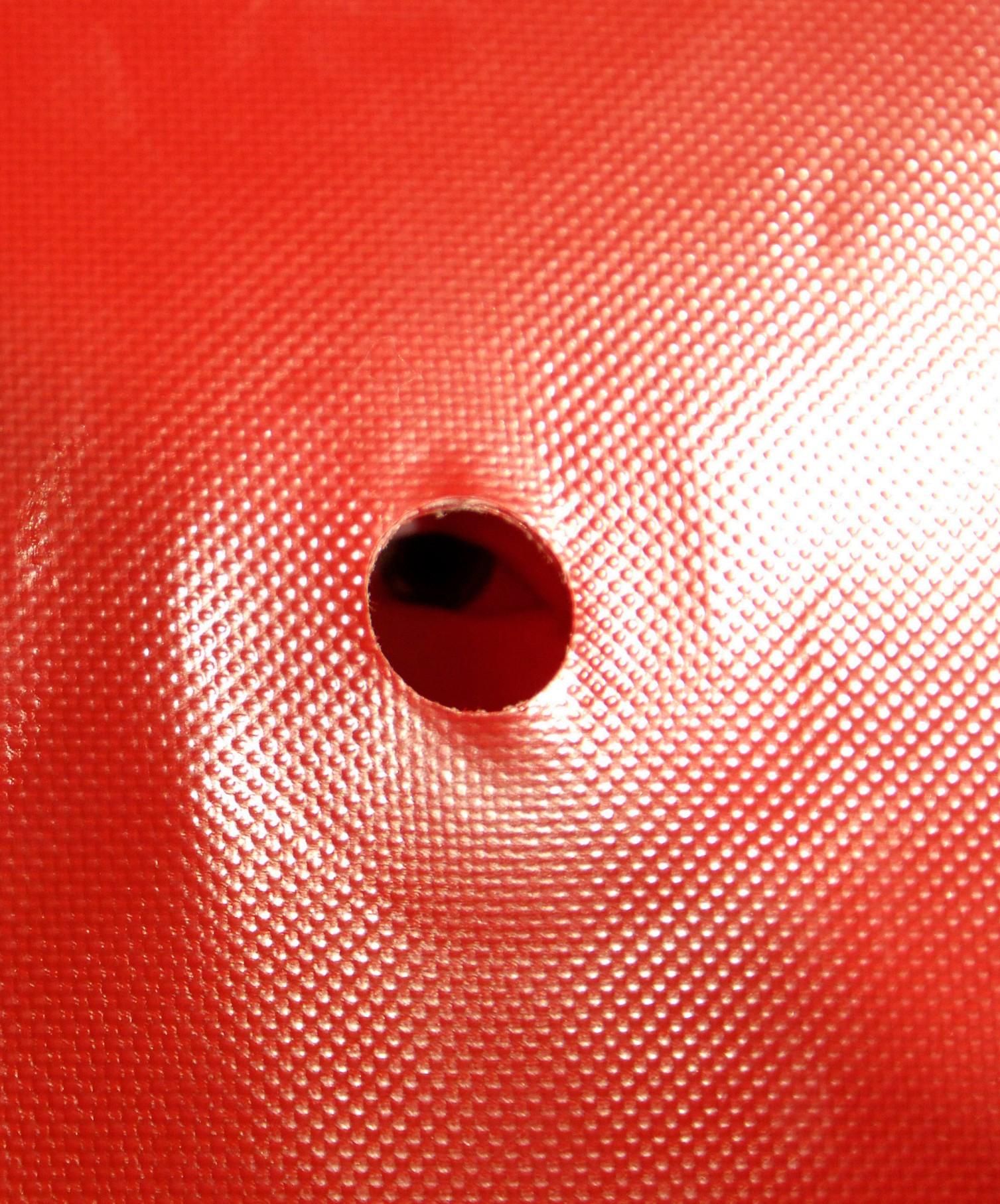
















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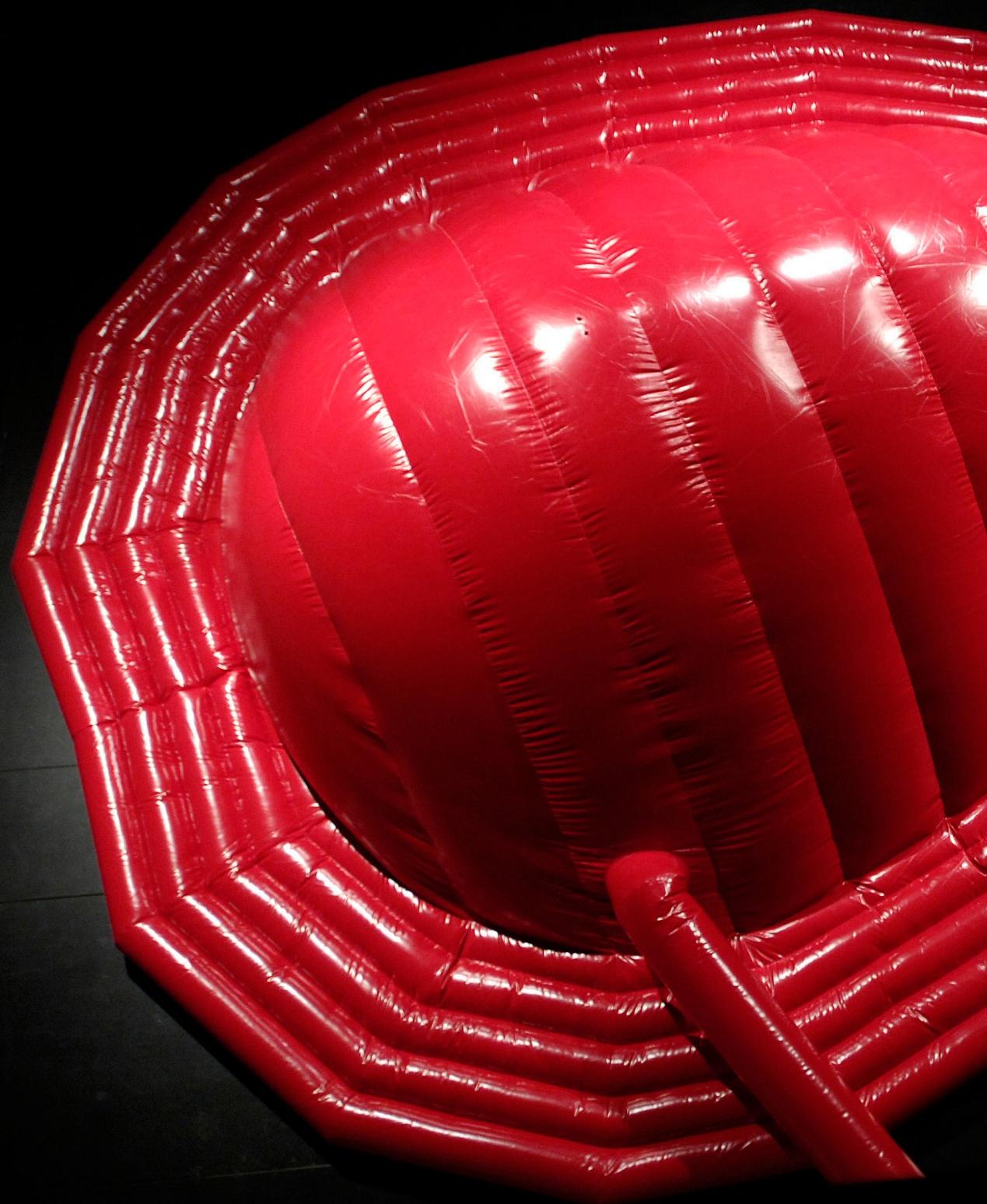
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**/ Air Supplied**

**David Cross**



# / Writing

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## DAVID CROSS'

### CONFOUNDING HYBRIDITY

MARTIN PATRICK

Artist David Cross' projects have an exacting, merciless feel, yet they incorporate a particular aesthetic abundance, as if attempting to bring together an amalgam of art and cultural references and get them to explode into a panoply of manifold sensory phenomena. Artworks foisted upon the viewer, not strictly at their own expense, but as a generous admission of how much we enjoy confronting our funhouse fears and maddening nightmares. Much can be elicited from this act of confounding hybridity. As with any act of creative synthesis, I could, as a diligent professional art critic and historian, enact a dissection of its components (which I will likely still endeavour to do). But, whether verging on cliché or not, it's important to note that Cross' practice amounts to more than the mere sum of its constituent elements. Many factors enter into the mix that can't easily be discretely enumerated and archived: radical shifts in tone, associations between gestures, the sheer amount of unpredictable variables that run through so many of the pieces. As the artist himself has stated: 'the value of performance art is that it is a medium of the moment, a mode of practice that is contingent, genuinely interactive, and often visceral.'<sup>1</sup>

Historically speaking, Cross' early art practice emerged from the crucible of late 20th Century Postmodernism, an era known for its wilful disunity, also characterised by the Poststructuralist tangles ensuing from Anglophonic appropriation of the European relativism of Derrida, et al. And in the wake of a potential downturn in the influence of 'Theory' writ large in contemporary art practice, a central problematic ensues: how to make art that's theoretically astute and informed, but not programmatic, dry as dust, so as to avoid an overly academicised pursuit more akin to the pedantic footnote than the visionary big picture. As a trained art historian, perhaps this quandary would seem even more urgent for Cross. But what's become especially significant and compelling about Cross' practice is the way

in which it both acknowledges past watershed moments of performance and body art, minimalism, and (neo-) conceptualism and sheds its direct debt, a recognition of tradition counterbalanced by a sense of contemporary experimentation; that there are now manifold ways to attack historical problems, and that perhaps they are not entirely historical, but still pressing and urgent, always already with us.

So much art is *unfunny*, and perhaps this serves too often as a default guarantor of its being considered 'consequential'. Cross' work however rarely begins without an ample dose of humour, although such humour might encompass obscure in-jokes, choice verbal play (Cross is an insightful art writer also), perverse re-arrangements and re-segmenting of realities. Cross' humour could be read as rather generation-shaped if not entirely generation-specific. Douglas Coupland's once infamous 'Generation X' being the one I am citing here, or Richard Linklater's cinematic 'Slackers', redolent of certain ironic, bemused modes of viewing one's surrounding context. (A member of this same dispersed generational clan myself, I harbour tremendous affinity with this worldview, such as it is.) But also there is in Cross' practice an inclination towards empathically investigating our intersubjective relations, however mediated and choreographed, while still keeping intellectual queries open but informed, in some ways recalling the movement of the late novelist David Foster Wallace into increasing sincerity and directness in his prose after an intense period of convoluted Postmodernist mind games.

Moreover, some awfully complex, and ultimately conflicted ideas of fun (and 'funny') and games are operating herein. How pleasurable is it exactly to be precariously balanced on some intentionally unstable architectonic devices? Especially to the degree that said devices radically diminish manifest assertions of control on the part of the viewer/participant? *I have to give myself over to these works.* Cross' artworks have a tendency of creating a state of encounter that could potentially seem disempowering, enervating even. The artist has spoken of his works as involving 'destabilising conditions', and this acts as a pointed pun as well, in that the actual material

conditions of Cross' installations can be destabilising as much as the affective dimensions and capacities of the work. Cross has a strong interest in evoking liminal states, in-between, ambiguous, polyvalent, disorientating. Some tricky intersections occur: nervous anxiety meeting hedonistic euphoria, dreamlike reverie juxtaposed with edgy abandon.

I have experienced these artworks in a number of ways, sometimes in full-on participatory mode (*Lean* (2010), *Pump* (2009)), at other times vicariously through the eloquent descriptions of fellow critics, via moving or still images, or within the narratives carefully woven by the artist himself, and the accounts of participants. It is indeed something to watch the actions undertaken by visitors to Cross' work, with a unique quotient of the unexpected manifest as: uncertainty, pleasure, and curiosity intermingling. Cross' practice explores the intricacies of framing and negotiating transitions and contingencies, never wholly stable, always encompassing risk. If play has functioned as a consistent theme throughout Cross' work, he significantly explores play as labour, work, and ordeal. In his projects, participants are contracted into the schema which unfolds, which in turn usually involves contact with the sculptural installation, the site in which it is located, and with the bodies of others, at times that of the artist. This engagement is driven by examining aspects of the haptic, the contextual, and with live performance mediated through video, photography, and installation.

The artist in early performance and video installations examined the assorted modalities and impacts of the gaze often directly confronting participants in unswerving acts of engagement. Works such as *Tear* (2000) or *Viscous* (1999) highlighted the often painful affects of scrutinizing the body in ways that could be seen as abject. The eyes of the artist which could only be seen through small holes atop his red domed installation *Bounce* (2006) recalled the threatening masquerade used in such movies as the *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchises, although it was actually Cross, lying prone inside while enacting an endurance performance who was vulnerable to the movements of the participants scrambling

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How pleasurable is it exactly to be precariously balanced on some intentionally unstable architectonic devices? Especially to the degree that said devices radically diminish manifest assertions of control on the part of the viewer/participant?

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Cross' variegated practice draws upon references across a wide range of the visual culture continuum: minimal, performance, and pop art alongside direct and indirect references to horror films, children's amusements, sporting events, and the occasional nod to sex toys.

onto the sculpture. More recently, this interrogation of the scopic has shifted from close consideration of the gaze towards the embodied, performative, participatory features of the work although the provisionality of vision as a means of knowledge is still central to his practice.

Cross' inflatable installations are characterised by their bold visual identity that simultaneously camouflages the complicated scenarios of interrelation, negotiation, and fear that can ensue around, on, and within their confines. Ideas of play, trust, the unexpected coexist and overlap in unequal parts of a novel performative equation. This often occurs in the staging of the more overtly competitive, sporting-style games that Cross has been configuring such as *Level Playing Field* (2013) and *Skyball* (2014). But there are clear and major differences to be discerned between 'real' sports and Cross' idiosyncratic artworks, as the artist has pointed out: 'While sport is, to varying degrees, focused on alignment of physical and mental co-ordination, it is also about beating your opponents, running faster than them, hitting more aces and cross-court winners,' as he describes it in his conversation with Cameron Bishop. 'I am, he suggests, interested in constructing scenarios that frustrate and block pure athleticism tempering physical engagement with cognitive barriers. By limiting vision, making a surface slippery, or accentuating the potential for phobias to be brought to the fore, the works neuter the performance of a pure athleticism.'<sup>2</sup>

Such performative contexts can be read as echoing literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the significance of the 'carnivalesque' in the Medieval era: 'The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the medieval social order were exceptionally strong. Therefore such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.'<sup>3</sup>

One could argue that Cross' projects in their democratising and diminishing of entrenched cultural and social categorisations evoke a similar notion of the carnivalesque, particularly when set against the increasing inequality and polarisation of the contemporary social sphere.

Cross' variegated practice draws upon references across a wide range of the visual culture continuum: minimal, performance, and pop art alongside direct and indirect references to horror films, children's amusements, sporting events, and the occasional nod to sex toys. The projects involve intensely tactile, luridly spectacular means, the bright colouration of amusement park attractions coinciding with atmospheres of potential peril and unease. The works often revolve around building a taxonomic array of gestural actions and movements: to climb, to slide, to pull, to fall, to lean, to jump, to hold, to balance. Cross' own presence as an actual and 'imperfect' body functions as a sort of anchor to the more fantastical aspects of his early projects.

If we do play the art history game, and put some precedents and affinities on the table, they are an eccentric and diverse lot, and among the names that occur to me are Franz Erhard Walther, Paul Thek, Bruce Nauman, Cindy Sherman, Dan Graham, Mike Parr, Paul McCarthy, Robert Morris and Yayoi Kusama. I recall Morris' concise statement in his 'Notes on Sculpture: Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience'.<sup>4</sup> And in a different vein, McCarthy's comment on Disney: 'It's the invention of a world. A Shangri-La that is directly connected to a political agenda, a type of prison that you are seduced into visiting'.<sup>5</sup> Or Nauman's statement on his own approach: 'Some of the pieces have to do with setting up a situation and then not completing it; or in taking away a little of the information so that somebody can only go so far, and then can't go any farther. It attempts to set up a kind of tension situation'.<sup>6</sup> Cross was especially affected by seeing the 1994 Nauman retrospective at Washington DC's Hirshhorn Museum. Here he observed Nauman's ability to knit an assortment of spectacular modes with equally acute yet painful meditations on human experience.

Somewhat surprisingly, the artist also cites the late abstract painter Ellsworth Kelly as a major influence via his engaging monochromatic abstractions. Kelly's rich visual syntax composed of deceptively simple, adjacent forms made a huge impact on the artist, as evidenced in his inflatable structures.

In Cross' *Hold* (2007) an enormous architectural maze designed for a solo performer and an individual audience member, participants climbed one at a time into the inflatable indigo structure needing to hold—and have confidence in—the always unseen performer's hand that appeared through a slit in the wall to guide them each across a high, narrow ledge to the exit on the other side. This, in turn, rather than being a group, athletic-style experience became paradoxically a very intimate investigation of the artist/viewer interrelationship, within a mammoth construction. While Cross' physical presence was once highly integral to—and indeed integrated within—such works, he has steadily begun to involve himself as a more choreographic, directorial presence. I would note that this might be related to his curatorial endeavours which have been significant to his creative identity in terms of thinking through and engaging with, on differing levels, projects that are site responsive and public in their orientation though he himself blames his less agile and resilient body.

Although Cross in many works has questioned the assumptions around both beauty and the grotesque in a very performative and individuated manner, redolent with his own wit, whimsy, and specific approach to materiality, more recently he has cast his view more towards the social body and its corresponding codes of conduct. Cross has spent years actively interrogating and problematising the relations between the so-called beautiful and the grotesque, and has acutely cited Baudelaire's aphorism: 'The beautiful is always strange'. Particularly framed through notions of difference and otherness, Cross' practice examines how our embodied subjectivities are nonetheless never fixed, singular, or continuous. Sometimes this takes

the form of a work that requires a reciprocal participation, and close contact as in *Pump* (2009), in which a smaller inflatable (that could intentionally be transported in a suitcase) allows the two performer/participants to insert their heads into openings that face one another, and control the structure via two footpumps. This exchange is non-verbal, and potentially strenuous and awkward, calling attention to each other's embodied participation and physical cues, becoming temporarily a quasi-unified being.

What Cross has in the past referred to as creating a 'Hansel and Gretel' effect with his sculptural architectural forms, a 'house of allure' is equally crucial to the understanding of a practice that recalls and reconfigures childhood fears and attractions simultaneously. The resulting effect upon the viewer often results in something far richer than one's average theme park ride, more unsettling in implications relating to perimeters, exteriority and interiority in flux, at times becoming evident as different spaces, at other times Cross' inflatable installations and scenarios summon a kind of fantasyland again evoking childhood daydreams (or sometimes, nightmares). Notions of ambiguity, horror, and the grotesque are left in eerie suspension in many of Cross' works, without any direct release of anxiety as in the resolution of standard escapist entertainment. Contrary to such formulas, Cross' practice ultimately develops its resonance through its more nuanced consideration of embodiment, experience, and immersion.

In speaking from the outset of a 'confounding hybridity', I have attempted to sketchily frame but not absolutely contain Cross' practice in its capacity to challenge our normative assumptions regarding self, identity, and the performance thereof. If cultural notions regarding beauty and ugliness are questioned and disrupted, a key strand of Cross' creative research, new questions have an opportunity to emerge that stretch our settled ideas, incorporating rather than disregarding difference. Similarly, this occurs in addressing notions of audience/participant, artist/author, conceptual/visual. By thoughtfully crafting works that intermix and entwine performance, installation,

and sculpture, Cross provokes us both seductively and uneasily. Our human associations constantly pressured by sensations that ultimately are not readily identifiable, comfortable, or safe.

- 1.** Cross, David. 'Some Kind of Beautiful: The Grotesque Body in Contemporary Art' PhD Thesis, Queensland University of Technology School of Visual Arts, 2006, 20.
- 2.** Bishop, Cameron, 'David Cross in Conversation with Cameron Bishop', *Drain* (Special issue on Athleticism, 2015): <http://drainmag.com/david-cross-in-conversation-with-cameron-bishop/>
- 3.** Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, 10.
- 4.** Battcock, Gregory, ed. *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968, 228.
- 5.** Weissman, Benjamin, 'Paul McCarthy', *BOMB* 84 (Summer 2003): <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2564/paul-mccarthy>.
- 6.** Kraynak, Janet, ed. *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, 182.



<b>Title</b>	<b>Bounce</b>
<b>Bounce</b>	
<b>First exhibited</b>	2005
<b>Media</b>	Performance / Installation
<b>Commissioner</b>	Wellington City Art Gallery, New Zealand
<b>Curator</b>	Sarah Farrar

## / Bounce

... I feel certain that I will be unable to scale the steep slope of the inflatable structure before me. My body is not built for climbing, nor running and jumping, the best way to get to the top of this shiny red hill. I wonder briefly if I have more of an affinity for the physicality of the work — its pleasantly round shape and the gentle rolls formed by seams in the material — than an attraction to it as a plaything.

## BOUNCE, 2005

CINDY BAKER

*I feel certain that I will be unable to scale the steep slope of the inflatable structure before me. My body is not built for climbing, nor running and jumping, the best way to get to the top of this shiny red hill. I wonder briefly if I have more of an affinity for the physicality of the work—its pleasantly round shape and the gentle rolls formed by seams in the material—than an attraction to it as a plaything.*

This is why I brought David Cross and his work, *Bounce* (2005), halfway around the world to Canada. It was not for the challenge of trying to mount the work, but because my feelings of inevitable failure are borne out of similar reasons why Cross created the work—an interest in inadequacy of the body, or, rather, of inadequate bodies. My research into the taboo body in performance is what led me to Cross' work and a need to see it in person; it is the kind of art that cannot be understood absent a firsthand experience.

*After several humiliating tries, and with the helping hand of someone who has already made it to the top, I have finally conquered Bounce. I am sweaty, huffing and puffing—flushed from embarrassment, exertion, and excitement. I'm afraid that I'm too heavy for this work; I move cautiously and tenderly, but I'm too excited not to play.*

This drive to explore is the core of *Bounce*: compelling a reaction, it makes performers of all who encounter it. Even the choice *not* to engage physically is a conscious and embodied one, a decision as performative as any kind of active engagement. Cross doesn't prescribe the nature of the audience's interaction; in *Bounce*, the freedom to explore is self-evident. He approaches the audience as a 'worthy adversary'. This antagonistic egalitarianism with which he approaches the audience is a more honest form of interaction than that which strives for an 'authentic' artist/audience connection; antagonism allows for critique from within.<sup>1</sup> By giving all (potential) participants the same authority as the audience that he has as the artist, any engagement becomes a valid approach to the

work. In engendering the production of new forms of knowledge, the artist cannot predetermine where those forms originate. However, the goal of egalitarianism does not necessarily suggest selflessness or generosity; critical engagement should meet critical response. In his writing, Cross suggests that the ambivalence of those who do not respond enhances the experience of the social context of the work for those who *do* respond. Ambivalence is a valid engagement and helps set up a dynamic framework for the performance.<sup>2</sup>

*I'm standing back and watching the public's reaction to and interaction with Bounce, which is set up in a prominent location beside the city's main downtown bus stop. A substantial minority of the audience is part of the art-going crowd, but most of participants are here by chance, attracted by the block-long bank of windows showcasing the bright red, shiny structure, and the telltale carnival hum of the air compressor issuing from within. Curious window shoppers, commuters waiting for their next connection, summer strollers, and parents tugged in by excited children peek inside to ask what it's all about and if they really, REALLY can just jump right in (or on, to be precise.) Bus drivers, after their third, fourth, fifth pass of the scene, stop in to ask what's going on. The lack of an admission fee arouses suspicion by passersby (the adults, at least). They feel as though we are somehow trying to trick them—and we are.*

Harnessing the spectacle is one of the strategies contemporary artists have come to employ to draw attention away from the fact that their work is capital-A-art (stodgy, intellectual, literally 'work'), thereby tricking an unsuspecting public into engaging with—and understanding, and delighting in—concepts and ideas that they may otherwise have thought too difficult or boring to bother with. And because of the content of the piece—the literal contents of the inflatable object—we are tricking the audience in more ways than one. *Bounce* would not be the work that it is without the attractive playfulness being balanced by the repulsive horror that exists right below the

surface. The piece is not as happy and carefree as it first appears; its shape, that of a giant mask, gives an indication as to the true nature of the object and that which is waiting to be discovered by those who have what it takes to reach the summit.

**1.** Bishop, Claire. 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.' *October* 110

(2004): 51-79. 65–67.

**2.** Cross, David. 'Some Kind of Beautiful: The Grotesque Body in Contemporary Art' PhD thesis. Queensland University of Technology Creative Industries Research Centre School of Visual Arts. 2006. October 18, 2012, 103.





**Title**  
*Hold*

**First exhibited**

2007

**Media**

Performance / Installation

**Commissioner**

Litmus Research Initiative,  
Wellington,  
New Zealand

**Curators**

Bec Dean  
(Performance Space, Sydney)  
Angharad Wynne-Jones  
(Arts House, Melbourne)

## / Hold

... While the physical challenge of the work was immediately manifest, what became apparent later was the work's challenge to human perception of signs, forms and structures within a total body consciousness, causing me to question more than once, 'Where does following instruction stop and common-sense kick-in?'

**HOLD, 2007**

BEC DEAN

David Cross' *Hold* was a performance project that held the material and physical promise of grand spectacle, but delivered its opposite. The performative action of *Hold*—that of two people holding one another—was centred within a towering, blue inflatable structure. When the work was presented in 2011 for Performance Space it was installed in the Carriageworks' largest performance venue—the only space that could contain it. The material economy and aesthetics of Cross' work invoked communal, playful activity, as only gigantic, inflated vinyl objects can. But this was a play of opposites, of push and pull, of give and take, and of altered expectations.

In spite of its imposing size and bold aesthetic, *Hold* was an intimate architectural context for an intense one-on-one interaction between performer and participant. As a condition of showing the work, Cross insisted that no information about the nature of the experience should be conveyed to visitors through marketing or didactic material before they entered the cavernous space, alone. In this restrained and precisely intentioned way, *Hold* diverged from any project I have worked on before or since and served to amplify (for myself anyway) just how much the physical experience of contemporary art practice is preceded and mediated by a virtual one. Risk, for one thing, is always disclosed, and in the so-called 'nanny state' of Australia with its strict health and safety laws dominating all of our encounters with culture, audiences are used to being primed with conditions and appropriate modes of behaviour before they even approach it.

*Hold* was promoted only with three questions:

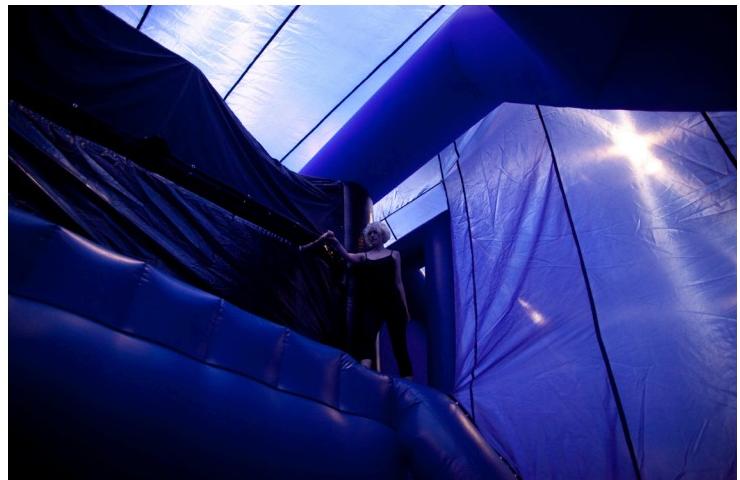
1. *Would you trust a total stranger?*
2. *Would you help a stranger in return?*
3. *Would you enter an artwork designed to test our fears of dark, tight spaces and our limits of trust?*

The questions while brief in nature, elucidated the major risks associated with participating in the project; to

trust and to be trusted in return and to confront fears one may or may not have. The questions also disclosed the reciprocal nature of the performance, and the challenge of participation as a test. In programming this work, I was privileged to all of its intricacies and I wish I had been able to encounter *Hold* without so much knowledge and only the questions to guide me. Armed as such, would I have ascended the ziggurat-like form by the steps on the left hand side? Would I have taken the hand offered to me, which appeared, disembodied through a cleft in the vinyl material? Would I have found my way through to the lightless passage on the other side? Would I have stopped or reciprocated? Jumped down onto the pillowry base of the structure? Or fallen?

My presence around the entrance to the work afforded insight into the multiple ways in which audiences read and responded to the object. While the physical challenge of the work was immediately manifest, what became apparent later was the work's challenge to human perception of signs, forms and structures within a total body consciousness, causing me to question more than once, 'Where does following instruction stop and common-sense kick-in?'

In his preliminary writing on the work, Cross referred to the Wagnerian term, *gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art—the core characteristic of which being its transformative powers, even if briefly felt by the 'spectator'. From my own experience however, the work rendered its affect powerfully in the opposite direction, which was to make one—through a process which untethered individuals from the comfortable, social occasion of art—more acutely aware of one's vulnerable selfhood. *Hold* amplified the frailty of my body, its potential for injury, the consequences of personal choices I made and my ability to comprehend and support the weight and strength of another human. It was a sensitising and dissembling experience, and one which stripped-away the previous expectations I held of my embodied cognition.





**Title***Retard***First exhibited**

2006

**Media**Performance / Installation  
/ Photography**Commissioner**Show Gallery,  
Wellington,  
New Zealand**Curators**Eugene Hanson  
Jenny Gillam

# / Retard

... this work was at least partly about failure, in so much as it was inevitable that someone was going to collapse at some stage, and failure's always more entertaining than success

**RETARD 2006**

MIKE TING

It's a strange thing to know that one is both the object and subject of an art exhibition, still stranger that one can't see the audience, that your almost naked, can barely hear anything and your trying to hold a physically strenuous and somewhat moronic looking pose. As one of the collaborators on *Retard*, myself and the other two performers only got a proper idea of what we were to do when we turned up at Show, the gallery hosting the work. The bright colours of the inflatable props couldn't conceal the fact that our three poses were reminiscent of being put in stocks, three bodies ready for experimentation and judgement, three adults wearing plastic nappies being consumed by David's relentlessly cheerful but somewhat sinister looking inflatable sculptures. Still, all part of the course for contemporary fine art I thought!

As I recall the three of us were in situ before any of the audience was let in. I could just hear them enter the gallery space as the noise from the air pump made it seem like you were on the inside of a vacuum cleaner. I had been studying 'classic performance art' such as Abramovic, Beuys, Ono, etc, and had come to the realisation that to do performance you had to, paradoxically, not perform. You had to be almost deadpan, stoical, foreground the idea and not you the performer. Absolutely no acting required here then. But with *Retard*, the physical restraint and the lack of eye contact made me aware that the requirement of this work was to become a docile body with no real ability to exert any form of agency or resistance. This is where I think the title of the work comes into play, the 'holding back' of not just physical freedom but the individuals full expressive freedom. I was familiar with David's work of course and knew that endurance would play a major part, so my goal if you can call it that was to simply maintain balance as long as possible, to not fall over. And this work was at least partly about failure, in so much as it was inevitable that someone was going to collapse at some stage, and failure's

always more entertaining than success. I became aware of myself trying to 'perceive' the audience as much as they were perceiving us, yet I also knew that they weren't really seeing us as individuals so much as experiments. I think because of this reversal of spectatorship I never felt vulnerable in any way, but this no doubt was aided by being in a gallery situation, and in a highly public place with a more diverse audience I'm certain that I would have felt quite differently.

A feeling of disorientation was becoming more and more apparent. I really didn't know if I was holding the sculpture upright or not, and I recall pushing the object forward at one stage to see if the audience's reaction would help me regain my bearings. I heard a murmur but nothing indicative, then I tried pulling the object back but was rewarded with the same reaction. There was little conception of time and as it turned out I was the first one to collapse. Vaguely recall a head rush, people supporting myself and the sculpture, and a middle aged women inquiring into whether or not I had done martial arts.

Looking at the documentation of the work now I'm reminded of a famous case study by Freud on Daniel Paul Schreber. Daniels father Moritz wrote over thirty books on childhood education and believed in strict childhood and teenage discipline, going to the extent of inventing braces and devices to ensure correct posture and prevent masturbation, traumatising both Daniel and his brother who later committed suicide. Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) make reference to Schreber being a 'body without organs', that is to say, a body of potentiality, a virtual body, although in Schreber's case that potentiality took the form of delusion and paranoia, and he died in an asylum in 1911. *Retard* and its connecting tubes looks like both a life support system and something that sucks the life out of the body in equal measure. The sterility of that most wipeable of fabrics, vinyl, aids this medical view, a vision of a psycho/physical lab that rewards closer scrutiny with only more disturbing visions.





**Title**  
*Pump*  
**First exhibited**  
2009  
**Media**  
Performance /  
Installation  
**Commissioner**  
Performance  
Studies  
International  
Zagreb, Croatia  
**Curator**  
Chris Braddock

## / Pump

... Its simplicity is enviable. Cross pulled it out of his suitcase in front of me. Reciting its overall dimensions, he excitedly demonstrated how it folded open. Then, in no time at all, he carefully rehearsed re-packing the sculpture with tube and foot pedal attachments nestled alongside.

## PUMP, 2009

CHRISTOPHER BRADDOCK

*Pump* could be a travelling performance artist device and, perhaps, a miniature version of David Cross' artworks. Its simplicity is enviable. Before its inaugural appearance on the 25th June at the 2009 Performance Studies International (*psi#15*) in Zagreb, Cross pulled it out of his suitcase in front of me. Reciting its overall dimensions, he excitedly demonstrated how it folded open. A bright yellow rectangular inflatable provided two identical head portals for Cross and any willing participant. Then, in no time at all, he carefully rehearsed re-packing the sculpture with air tube and foot pedal attachments nestled alongside. I recalled a moment in Werner Herzog's film on *Antarctica Encounters at the End of the World* when Libor Zicha from the former Soviet Union demonstrates his survival backpack, pulling out an inflatable canoe and folding it back to nothing again. These characteristics rub off on the meaning of *Pump*: peripatetic, tenacious, speedy, operational and playful.

On the day, Cross was itinerant — searching out the best spot with premium exposure to potential participants and passers-by. Within moments performer and device were activated and ready. His head in place but pumping on his own, Cross kept the device two-thirds inflated. To maintain full inflation (and the single viewing tunnel linking each others' right eye) performer and participant needed to pump together. Each exchange continued for as long as each participant could pump. However, with lengthy solo intervals, the performance continued for close to three hours until Cross could barely stand.

*Pump* could be a colour-field sculpture enlivened with bodies (many of Cross' artworks suggest the minimalist colour-field painting of Ellsworth Kelly). The body's impact with inflated vinyl is key. It's important to grasp the effort of pumping, the air pressure on your head, that too much pumping causes pain, the feeling of sweat against your

cheeks, of monocular vision that limits depth perception, of yellow vision, of keeping your balance, of smelling the previous participant, of feeling a spectacle and so on. This intensive performing together with the material object provokes a visceral and uneasy synergy.

Franz Erhard Walther's diary entry of 1969 referring to his *1st Work Set* comments, 'informal modeling by means of several bodies/ expanding the center/ two sculptural bodies with unseen space in between/ moveable pedestal field/ actions on two pedestals/ position-moving bodies in space'.<sup>1</sup> Walther's post-minimal and process-driven sculptural installations simultaneously provoke and are provoked by performance. This territory is Cross' primary commitment. Grafting onto Walther's words — Cross models with a playful participation of bodies, expanding whatever a spatial or bodily center might mean. He creates sculptural bodies redolent with unseen spaces of play, fear, desire, discomfort and endurance. During the Zagreb performance of *Pump*, a young woman struck up a mesmerizing exchange with Cross. The two pumped in measured rhythmic unison for at least half-an-hour. I saw action on two human pedestals or Constantine Brancusi's *The Gate of Kiss* in performance. This is sculpting performance and performing sculpture — bodies as moveable pedestal fields of action.

<sup>1</sup>. Walther, Franz Erhard (2011), *Dust of Stars: A Drawn Novel*, 71 Selected Memories (Kunstmuseen Krefeld: Distanz). p.249





VIDEO BLOOD

**Title**  
*Receding Plane*  
**First exhibited**  
2008  
**Media**  
Video  
**Commissioner**  
Ramp Gallery  
Hamilton,  
New Zealand  
**Curator**  
John Hurrell

## / Receding Plane

Cross' 'controlling' is of course extremely candid, and really a sort of subject matter in itself. He doesn't want us to fall for the 'construction'. In fact he wishes us to enjoy the artifice and to suspend belief in the image.

## RECEDING PLANE, 2008

JOHN HURRELL

Do you like ambiguous art titles that are witty? Or do you groan and find them tiresome?

The word ‘orange’ was once an early working title for this project but it got transmuted into *Receding Plane* which is far more descriptive and precise. Yet surprisingly, ‘orange’ turns out to be a strangely inverted pun when applied to this project, not only in its fruitiness (I’ll reveal why shortly) but in its function as colour — for it optically advances. Although *Receding Plane* is a video, it is also what I’d call a ‘Spatialist painting.’ And David Cross is very interested in space.

Spatialism is the term applied to the paintings of Lucio Fontana (1899–1968), the Argentinean Italian who became famous for his vertically slashed paintings of the late forties. When he sliced the faces of some of his canvases with a Stanley knife you could see the background walls inside the stretchers, and the edges of ‘wounds’ which curled outward towards the viewer. They were considered a painting/sculpture hybrid.

In his painting/video hybrid, Cross mixes Fontana’s canvas methodology with that of Barnett Newman to make the rectangle orange and bigger. He changes it from a portrait to a landscape, turning the rectangle and the slit horizontal, making them less vaginal and more an eye. An eye through which in the film we see Cross’ own eyes observing us observing him. Two eyes observing like those seen behind the Halloween Masks in the 2005 *Closer* photographs.

In the mid forties Ad Reinhardt once did a cartoon of an abstract canvas admonishing a puzzled and hostile viewer by saying ‘Well, what do you represent?’ The theme of artworks turning their gaze upon their audience has been explored by many artists, including Tino Sehgal (using actors), Dan Graham and Gerhard Richter (with mirrors), and Bruce Nauman (using video cameras). And explored by curators like Thierry de Duve, who is his 2000 exhibition

‘Look’ in Brussels, had one section addressing the visitor called ‘Here you are.’

With *Receding Plane* Cross continues exploring his favourite theme, the ramifications of the gaze, his own gaze in particular — and his ocular ailment of being born without tear ducts or mucus membranes. In a particularly informative interview with Emma Bugden that accompanied the showing of the *Closer* video and photographs in City Gallery, he spoke of his medical condition and of his ability in ‘carefully controlling how (his) body is represented and constructed.’

In *Receding Plane* we see him without his glasses, blinking but not wiping his owlish gaze, with ne’er a tear or eyelash to be seen. As his eyes ordinarily run continually, this suggests either he took some medication so he couldn’t weep for five or six minutes, or that he has meticulously edited the film. The latter is probably the case.

What of the orange colour of the canvas? It seems to reference Cross’ earlier reddish-orange *Bounce* installation, and Barnett Newman’s famous *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* (1950/1), but it also alludes to the juicy citrus fruit. That fruit might refer to a commonplace story about jazz musicians, that reed players like clarinettists or saxophonists dry up and lose the required saliva in their mouths if they notice somebody in the front row of their audience sucking on an orange. It stops them producing the oral mucus that they need to play. Maybe an orange mask will similarly stop Cross secreting tears.

Cross’ ‘controlling’ is of course extremely candid, and really a sort of subject matter in itself. He doesn’t want us to fall for the ‘construction’. In fact he wishes us to enjoy the artifice and to suspend belief in the image. Like Buñuel’s filmed ‘slashing’ of the woman’s eye in *Un Chien Andalou*, which we now know was the eye of a dead cow, Cross in the last forty seconds of his video does something much more subtle. He reveals a craftily engineered state of suspension where his Barnett Fontana masterpiece seems to shakily recede into the murky darkness of art history.

That withdrawal we discover is actually executed on a flying fox in a children's playground, and a continuation of Cross' earlier performances which explored play and other related infantile bodily pleasures. Here he acknowledges art's primary function, the fun gained in its making, and imagines our responses to his mischief from inside his surrogate womb. He is teasing out the rewards of engineering surprise or playing tricks. Examining how surprise mixes playfulness with fear to provide an effective means of learning.

His performance has many layers. The canvas in the landscape is funny but also a continuation of the *Closer* horror masks. With the 'painting' he is playing 'boo' in reverse. He doesn't suddenly advance towards the viewer but does the opposite. With *Receding Plane* Cross' gentle surprise is his pulling back — while enjoying himself bodily as he moves away speedily in space.

Cross' video continues the theme of *Closer* which examined male beauty, with his face being juxtaposed with other male faces. *Receding Plane* examines 'canvas beauty' instead, incorporating his own 'grotesque' eyes to subvert the purity of the modernist, art historical canon. You may notice that the canvas has a horizontal crease that traverses its surface, something untenable in a 'professionally' prepared stretcher where cotton duck or linen is normally carefully checked by a painter to ensure it is blemish free.

The orange painting is another sort of mask and more. It springs on to the viewer a sudden shifting of space, something related to Cross' other more recent performance *Hold* (2007), where participants had to trust an unseen collaborator to stop them falling off a shelf on a high, inflatable structure.

*Receding Plane* begins with a similar trust, then breaks it. As he explained about *Bounce* (2005) to Bugden, it desired to devise a moment of uncertainty when the viewer loses their bearings as a spectator. They experienced alarm when they realised somebody was watching them from inside the orange 'cushion' they were jumping on.

*Receding Plane* sets up the illusion of being filmed indoors and then abandons that fiction to leave you feeling vulnerable, standing alone in the middle of a playground while the artist disappears into the trees. He is playing with you twice over. Teasing you, and inviting you to play tag or hide and seek. Part artwork — where your presence as viewer is a crucial, implied component — and part playmate.



AIDS Day  
December

**Title***Drift***First exhibited**

2011

**Media**Participatory  
Sculpture**Commissioner**National Institute  
for Experimental  
Arts, University of  
New South Wales &  
City of Sydney**Curator**

Margaret Farmer

# / Drift

For an individual, to encounter a David Cross work is to risk unpleasant self-knowledge; with *Drift* the difficult knowledge was that so few could be described as engaging with change adaptively.

## DRIFT, 2011

MARGARET FARMER

'An experience of place is always an experience of weather.'  
— Barbara Campbell-Allen<sup>1</sup>

In the summer of 2011, Sydney's gritty Taylor Square was at times dramatically altered by *Drift* — an enormous yellow inflatable sculpture that, with a sense of play laced with menace, overlaid and repurposed the thoroughfare's sporadically shooting fountain to create a public waterslide.

Part of *We Make This City* — a public art program seeking to galvanise responses to climate change by countering fear, inertia and social risk with trust, beauty, community and action — *Drift* offered the users of Taylor Square an opportunity to experience a changed and changing environment.

Some passers-by responded with curiosity; others hurried on or were dismissive. Those choosing to participate did so at some inconvenience and discomfort — divesting themselves of belongings, and, frequently, the majority of their clothes. They then walked up a lengthy ramp to enter the fringed maw of the tunnel. Once inside, they were subject to the random play of the redirected fountain, which usually assisted their passage downwards.

Emotions ran high. Recalling responses to that other yellow public sculpture, Ron Robertson-Swann's infamous *Vault* (1980), some struggled with *Drift*'s categorisation as art. For one passing painter, *Drift* was deeply insulting. A visiting curator shook his head in disapproval and walked away. For some, the experience was an anticlimax — they wanted more complication within the tunnel or a steeper, longer slide. Others revelled in the experience, having far too much fun to meditate on the nature of urban space or participatory works. Several exquisitely formed young men turned *Drift* into a theatre for display to appreciative applause from the adjacent bar. Yet others, primarily those regularly sleeping rough in Taylor Square, were angered by the change to their environment.

This extreme variability of experience is a hallmark of David Cross works. *Hold* (2010), for example, forced many participants to face their personal wiring between fear and reason, trust and generosity, by asking them to negotiate a high narrow yielding ledge with the only available purchase being a disembodied hand. A light, agile and confident participant might traverse this space swiftly and nimbly, without physical or mental consequence; but after participating I encountered two women in tears — one seemingly suffering humiliation and shame, the other sharing her sense of expansion. For an individual, to encounter a David Cross work is to risk unpleasant self-knowledge; with *Drift* the difficult knowledge was that so few could be described as engaging with change adaptively.

Beyond its intention, *Drift* highlighted the precariousness of human endeavour in the face of environmental change. The presentation of *Drift* was disrupted by unseasonal inclement weather and the limits of current civic capacities to cope with it. For both downpours at the planned time of presentation and post-deluge stormwater contamination of the underground reservoir from which the fountain plays rendered participation in the work unsafe. Cross published the water quality readings on Facebook and created signs explaining why the work wasn't always being presented as advertised, drawing attention to the environmental deficiencies of a water feature and civic space intended to give respite. Thus *Drift* became evidence of the disruption caused by changing weather; and the frequently thwarted artist and installers models of the dogged determination required to ensure that work, art, play and community endure the coming future.

<sup>1</sup>. Quoted in *Terra Alterius: Land of Another*, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 2004.





**Title**

*Pause*

**First exhibited**

2011

**Media**

Performance / Installation

**Commissioner**

New Zealand Pavillion,  
Prague Quadrennial,  
Czech Republic

**Curators**

Sue Gallagher  
Tracey Collins

# / Pause

— surreal approach — vertical  
— inching — ultimate hands —  
promise — weight — a perfect  
disappearance with the universe  
.....and then I forgot about gravity  
reclining into a suspension and  
freedom, my position is a perfect  
panorama for one and with all no  
less and no more, my gaze is the  
measure of what I see, I feel my  
head and feet and I make a balance  
with an open arm impromptu to the  
view. SOLO.....Pause .....

Preparation — anticipation

## **PAUSE, 2015**

PHILLIP ADAMS

Climber — survivor—vertical — black surface —  
improvisation — determination — irregular narrow field  
— assent — escape off the floor — first imbalance —  
marker — new terrain — look up — hatch — first relief  
— towards — farewell moment — air supporting me from  
the inside — disappearance — periphery — not yet —  
horizontal — reach the other place — available — question  
— disappearance now — sound in my hands — thinking  
— placement — half way — peace — rope — curve —  
finding body — rest — twist — changing planet — new  
space — more — spread — horizon — other movement —  
stillness — I like air — precipice — edge — platform — high  
— spaced — level — safe — permission granted — decisions  
— massive — breathing at last — inhalation of space  
— impossible balance — length of body — measure —  
separation — adjustment — my place — my time — bigness  
— pleasure — conquest — movies — sanctuary — Lost  
Horizon — utopia — thrust — disbelief — chance — decent  
— surreal approach — vertical — inching — ultimate hands  
— promise — weight — a perfect disappearance with the  
universe .....and then I forgot about gravity reclining  
into a suspension and freedom, my position is a perfect  
panorama for one and with all no less and no more, my gaze  
is the measure of what I see, I feel my head and feet and I  
make a balance with an open arm impromptu to the view.  
SOLO.....Pause .....Preparation — anticipation  
— transformation — pulse — expectation — returning  
— bargaining — textures a real now — mantra — scared  
— grip with agreement — Flash Gordon — inhalation —  
open hands — release — fathom — wind — black cradle  
— everything crumble — canyon — acceptance — gigantic  
return — arrive .....*And then I looked up and faced the air  
that held me over the sky and walked away holding my  
shoes and the performance in my body.*





**Title**  
*Lean*  
**First exhibited**  
2012  
**Media**  
Installation  
**Commissioner**  
Wellington City  
Art Gallery,  
New Zealand  
**Curators**  
Aaron Lister  
Abby Cunnane

## / Lean

... it's not always immediately clear how one might interact with such works, what level of contact is appropriate, or even whether the reception will be benign. Questions of subjectivity arise in response to the terse imperatives of the titles: 'Hold' — what/who? 'Bounce' — in a gallery? 'Tear'?? The pun is a disquieting one.

*Lean*, a four-part sculpture made of inflated white PVC, anticipates that one might do just that — lean on it, climb on it, even jump through it — or just lean back against the wall and watch others lean, climb, jump, recover, repeat. Compulsion and fear, amusement and hesitance play equal parts in the encounter with the looming, almost eccentrically tactile work. Stripping back to your socks in order to run at the work is an intimidating proposition; despite this it's almost constantly in 'use'. Occasionally, someone emerges with a bleeding nose.

Almost always verbs, the titles of earlier works by David Cross — *Hold, Pump, Bounce, Tear* — identify the work as a site of physical activity, rather than of contemplation. A recent outdoor installation, *Drift* (2011), temporarily borrowed the site of a civic water fountain and acted as public waterslide. The way to engage with *Drift* was obvious; any weighty associations with art were quickly subsumed by a good time. Yet it's not always immediately clear how one might interact with such works, what level of contact is appropriate, or even whether the reception will be benign. Questions of subjectivity arise in response to the terse imperatives of the titles: 'Hold' — what/who? 'Bounce' — in a gallery? 'Tear'? The pun is a disquieting one. And questions proliferate around the work itself: is it less of an artwork when one is recklessly hurling one's body at it, to land in a sprawling pile on the slippery PVC pillow, more when simply observing others interacting with it, or as a formal sculptural object in an empty gallery space? Does it stop being an artwork when it's deflated at the end of the exhibition, unceremoniously packed down and taken away to lie in storage until the next opportunity for re-animation?

Like its predecessors, the object *Lean* is deployed to initiate an event, or series of events. It is at the centre of a situation where the rules of behaviour are not clear, or are not rules. It confuses the divide between art and entertainment, architecture and object, interactive play

and physical ordeal. Standing alone, *Lean* operates as a minimalist sculpture with references to inflatable pop works of the 1970s, and as a readymade. Yet the hissing breath of the air compressor, which keeps it inflated, undermines the pristine art experience: it sounds like a fairground. Similarly, the white signifies an immaculate, gallery-conscious readiness, yet within seconds of play the work is inevitably marred with the grubby marks of hands and feet.

Cross makes works which connect in an often direct way with human situations of intimacy: vulnerability, exposure, thrill. They induce trepidation as well as enjoyment, engender sometimes phobic reactions as well as euphoria. An unknown artwork is a stranger, not always to be trusted. Many of Cross' works have an inside, and this unknown space is crucial to the viewer/participant's experience of them. The four lookalike sculptures that make up *Lean* are not, however, identical in actuality, and the experience of entering them is not the same. To say how they differ would be a spoiler — you have to be there. Demanding trust, bodily and psychological risk, here the soft-edged sculpture is ultimately unyielding.





**Title**  
*Level Playing Field*  
**First exhibited**  
2013  
**Media**  
Participatory Installation  
**Commissioner**  
SCAPE 7, Christchurch,  
New Zealand  
**Curator**  
Blair French

## / Level Playing Field

Air circulating through it, almost breathing, backdropped by exposed, largely unoccupied concrete structures paused somewhere between construction and destruction, the sculptural form acted as a focal point, a living organ transplanted into the newly reopened, deeply scarred heart of the city.

## LEVEL PLAYING FIELD, 2013

BLAIR FRENCH

*Level Playing Field* made its first public appearance in the form of notices on-line calling for involvement. This might be a common enough feature of participatory art. Here, however, the call-out was not simply an announcement of an event or an action — notice of a time and place for individuals to gather. Rather, it was an invitation to self-organisation, a call for teams of people to form and sign-up for a new sporting competition — the new game ‘Powerslide’ invented by David Cross and played in, on and around an inflatable structure designed by the artist. In teams of six friends, co-workers, classmates, members of sporting clubs and the like entered a structured competition that was physically challenging (although accessible across ages and abilities), enjoyable and perhaps just a little cathartic for residents of an earthquake battered city. Here art adopted the guise of a community sporting event.

Some 28 teams signed up for ‘Powerslide’, competing across the six weeks of the 2013 SCAPE Public Art: Christchurch Biennial. The game took place within and around a large inflatable rectangular structure, approximately 20metres x 12metres, reminiscent of the bottom section of a massive plinth. Whilst high enough for people to stand upright inside the bright green and orange game structure, it had the appearance of keeping low to the ground, hugging the gravel surface of the site — one of many grey blocks of inner-city land vacated by buildings first damaged by the major 2011 earthquake, then demolished and the resultant rubble removed. At one end of the structure sat a shipping container of the sort sighted all over the city serving as structural blocks propping up damaged architecture, as temporary offices, shops, food outlets and the like. In this instance, however, it provided storage and the platform for signage, including an electronic scoreboard and clock.

The game itself was relatively simple. One team would enter the inflated structure, where the space was gridded with straps connecting top to bottom — a malleable, indoor

forest. Tactically coordinating themselves as a group the players would pull on these straps, causing sections of the surface above them to move and dip and undulate. Often using the whole weight of their bodies the team inside gymnastically manipulated the whole structure, bringing it to life. Their purpose was to disrupt the passage of the opposing team across the top of the soft form. Over a set period of time, one by one the players from this team would clamber up one sloping end, attempt to run across the dynamic, even treacherous surface, and dive into a chute that sent them sliding down the far end of the structure into a soft landing area. They would then get up, sprint back around the side of the work and tag their next teammate in line who would then attempt the same. An umpire monitored progress and signalled a point for every successful traverse of the ‘playing field’.

Whilst centred on a structure that could be transported, rolled out, inflated and used for this game pretty much anywhere, *Level Playing Field* was developed with the specific context of Christchurch in mind, not just its earthquake- (and subsequent demolition-) ravaged physical environment, but also its complex and diffuse emotional and psychological state as a community. Whilst the two major earthquakes of September 2010 and February 2011 stand out for impact on the city and its populace, between the first major quake of 4 September 2010 and the launch of *Level Playing Field* three years later, Christchurch had experienced over 11,000 tremors. Most (but not all) of these were in and of themselves relatively minor, but accumulatively they built an experience of a volatile, unstable ground. *Level Playing Field* tapped into this experience, acknowledging its place in the psyche of the city and harnessing that energy into game form — a game, perhaps, uniquely of and for that place, Christchurch being a city also often associated with a passion and prowess for sport. In doing so it also created an environment and occasion for traits often spoken of in relation to crisis situations to coalesce — the forming and working together of groups manifesting teamwork, communal identity and resilience.<sup>1</sup>

*Level Playing Field* functioned at a nexus of community event, sporting competition and participatory artwork, drawing together threads of interest and activity common to each. People came together temporarily for shared goals or common purpose (to be experienced both personally and as a group). They met regularly, forming a new pattern of relationships and activity within their daily schedules, if only for a few weeks. They sought enjoyment, competition and companionship. Or perhaps they were just curious, or cajoled by others. They worked within and tactically negotiated a particular environment, circumstance and set of instructions in such a way as to extend individual ability and creativity through its operation within a collective. Rules were important, and the artist placed a lot of emphasis on the drafting and redrafting of the rules of the game and codes of behaviour. There were practical reasons here, of course, in terms of the functionality of the game, its enjoyment and the safety of participants. But the rules could also be construed as a text of sorts, a score, the script for an instructional artwork. (There was no doubt here that Cross was equally conscious of the principles and histories underpinning the invention of games on one hand, and the traditions and conventions of instructional art on the other.) The activity asked for concentrated use of senses — sight, sound and touch in particular. It called for physical labour and for communication. And it drew participants into a public performance of sorts — they were on display, performing for watching crowds much like a sporting event, but also an art performance.

In making these connections, I mean to draw attention to lines of intersection between these realms of activity, not to suggest a shared identity across these realms. Team sports and participatory artworks are as distinct from one another as they may be similar. The point is that here Cross adroitly yoked them together in response to and stemming from an unusually acute situation. And in making these connections Cross also created a work that could also be construed as an extraordinary public sculpture. People — the bodies and voices of participants and viewers — aside, the bright inflatable body lay across its

bleak grey site as if some form of being transplanted from another reality. Air circulating through it, almost breathing, backdropped by exposed, largely unoccupied concrete structures paused somewhere between construction and destruction, the sculptural form acted as a focal point, a living organ transplanted into the newly reopened, deeply scarred heart of the city.

My favourite photographs of the work are not those spectacular ones featuring bodies flying across its surface, framed by monochrome ruins in the background, as wonderful as they are as testaments to the unadulterated joy of the human form in flight. Rather, they are the ones taken from high above out the window of a newly opened hotel, looking over a field of grey gravel, cracked road surface and temporary fencing, with this playing field — this invitation to let loose and play — edging into view, a block of sharp colour making temporary claim on the environment and psyche of the city.

**1. Equally, the title of the work had a context-specific element — ‘level playing field’ resonating ironically with a populace battling inequities in political, bureaucratic and financial influence in the painfully slow repair and rebuild of their city.**



**Title**

*Skyball*

**First exhibited**

2014

**Media**

Participatory Sculpture

**Commissioner**

Campbelltown Arts Centre,  
Western Sydney

**Curator**

Paul Gazzola

# / Skyball

Of course, not everyone came. Not everyone saw it as something for them. The pack of young boys, who hovered around the edges, never stepped onto the field to make a team. And in the end the local motorcycle riders returned after we packed up to do wheel stands across the oval. But those that played wanted to keep it here. To have a set of pods as their own.

## **SKYBALL, 2014**

PAUL GAZZOLA

Generating a participatory artwork is not always an easy task. Making one that people want to have around for the future is a game changer. *SKYBALL IS HERE!*

So its 5:30 in the afternoon on Saturday at the Monster Park in Airds and the young local boy, temporarily named Pocket Rocket, is eagerly waiting for the timed whistle blow to boot a football into the air. The sweat and tension is high both on the field and off as the undefeated Mandy's Maulers are doing battle with another team of local challengers in the final seconds of what is the inaugural grand final of the world's newest competitive sport, *Skyball*.

Pocket Rocket grins as he sets sail another point maker into the melee of the ever-shifting mass of players in their custom-made pods. The clock ticking down as the ten highly mobile bodies encased in identical inflatable sculptural forms produce warring factions and formations. The crowds cheering on as artist as MC — David Cross unravels his sports commentator's quick repartees. Instantly naming players and the strategies of play that unfolded as the teams collided and rolled across the grass. Spectacular choreographies of moving sculptural forms bound in a singular aim — to catch a ball in their netted tops and score the most points.

This was just one part of the joyous and highly communal scenes that awaited those who ventured to see and participate in this new work from artist David Cross. Combining influences of rugby with shades of football & soccer, *Skyball* continued with a growing number of the artist's projects, that gathers communities in a site of camaraderie and competition. These highly considered works use inflatable sculptural forms within carefully constructed scenarios to generate significant and deeply engaging participatory art projects — framed as sporting events. But unlike the precursor project — *Level Playing Field* (2013), where a huge inflatable structure became the site for engagement, *Skyball* housed players inside their

own individual structures to form teams that competed with each other. Successfully uniting the vernacular of contemporary art practices and Australian sporting traditions within the ubiquitous home of the grassy community sports oval.

Highly sociable and inclusive in its attempts to gain traction within the local community, *Skyball* successfully brought together many of the cultural groups of the local area. By using play as the medium of engagement through the creation of a series of transparent, lightweight and curiously attractive pods that offered anyone the opportunity to get into and move in, *Skyball* substantiated the idea that conceptually rich participatory art projects can take on the aesthetical as well as the openly inclusive. Involvement was not lost here in a web of intrigue that only a few art specialists could apprehend, but operated as a true and honest ask of those that chose to play in the making of a performative/art event.

*Skyball* occupied a mostly unused sports field in the centre of the suburb of Airds. On these days, the young motorcyclists, who used the terrain as their own, kept their distance. The cultural groups that for the most remain divided in this community came together. Teams were instantly formed. Winners and losers played again. Friendships created as the games unfolded. Tactics and strategies were discussed. Abilities became skills and in turn shared knowledge. People gathered to watch on a Saturday as they would at any sports gathering. To cry out and cheer on their favourites. They joined in the spectacular making of play. They brought food and drinks. Parents participated alongside their children. The pause in-between the official games became their domain, to get inside and be pushed along. Laughing as the horizon was spun around and around. Making their own rules, their own games. This was the art of engagement. This was *Skyball* — the world's newest competitive ball sport.

Now please don't let me paint a picture of utopian ideals that art is the all-mighty social harmoniser but something began to happen here that changed the way people saw



what art could be. It was about them, there, joining in to play. They made the art through their desire to take part.

And it was their game to play, invent and interpret. No outsiders to challenge what they saw it could be but only themselves. Their community. Their own take on what *Skyball* was.

Of course, not everyone came. Not everyone saw it as something for them. The pack of young boys, who hovered around the edges, never stepped onto the field to make a team. And in the end the local motorcycle riders returned after we packed up to do wheel stands across the oval. But those that played wanted to keep it here. To have a set of pods as their own.



**Title***Stroll***First exhibited**

2015

**Media**

Performance Sculpture

**Commissioner**

New Zealand Pavillion,

Praque Quadrennial,

Czech Republic

**Curators**

Amanda Yates

Stuart Foster

# / Stroll

... About 1-hour into our walk I was struck by another feeling, this time of intense loneliness and isolation. People often asked me what I was doing or made offers to engage but the pod obstructed our communication. To counteract this I invited our minder to enter the pod with me creating an intense intimacy and new negotiation as we coordinated our bodies to move in unison and collaboratively decided on where to go next.

## **STROLL, 2015**

RENAE SHADLER

*Stroll* is a walking performance artwork that takes place in the streets of a city. It involves David Cross and an invited companion literally strolling through the city in inflatable cylinder-shaped architecture with coloured coverings, referred to as 'pods'. The pods cover the walker's upper-body and are approximately 1-meter in diameter, making them at times difficult to negotiate when moving through narrow laneways and crowded malls. *Stroll* was first presented as part of the New Zealand exhibit at the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space (PQ15) where the city's famous cobbled streets, hordes of tourists and large parklands added to the work's intrigue.

If you have encountered one of Cross' works before you will be familiar with the air of secrecy he creates around his pieces. *Stroll* was no exception with the walkers being assisted only by two minders who at no time actively explained the work to passers-by or offered links to further information. It was this ephemeral chance-encounter that added to the mysterious walking pods fascination. I imagine outside the context of PQ15, which included a lots of performative actions outdoors, this rupture of the everyday streetscape would have been even more striking.

What the public may not have been aware of is that Cross was being led by his companion throughout the entire journey. The two pods often followed one after the other with Cross being cautious to not at any moment determine the route. *Stroll* was further structured so that each companion only walked once and the route remained entirely unrehearsed. This caused moments of active problem solving and reorientation as the companion negotiated the inflatable architecture, public and streetscape. The walkers at times were forced to retrace their steps if they came to a passage that was too narrow, move sideways between people or even lift their pods over fences. These moments of inaccessibility or reconfiguration could be seen as a metaphor for the mobility of people in

contemporary society, be it within a city or globally. As the work's nuances became visible the passerby was able to delve into the image and create personal interpretations that resonated with their personal musings at that time.

At PQ15 I had the privilege of being Cross' companion for one of the walks. From within the pod I was able to receive the varied responses the work provokes. To begin we travelled over the Charles Bridge, otherwise known as the tourist highway of the city. Here I instantly felt like a photo opportunity as people posed with me for a holiday happy-snap. At other times people chose not to engage with the image or were suspicious as to what we were promoting, reflecting the desensitisation caused by advertising campaigns. Some people also chose to walk alongside us in silence contemplating the image or stood back to take in the walking pods in contrast to the surrounding area.

To counteract this I invited our minder to enter the pod with me creating an intense intimacy and new negotiation as we coordinated our bodies to move in unison and collaboratively decided on where to go next. Excited by this discovery I later invited a passerby whom I didn't know to enter my pod. He was a young male who didn't speak English and was quite playful as he shunted the pod slamming into David's pod and creating a playful battle. This caused people to gather around us and added to the spectacle of the work.

During PQ15 Cross walked with six companions and documented each walk with a written summary and photo series. The walks and routes differed dramatically depending on the walker as some were more athletic than others, attracted to urban or natural environments and so on. This collection of written and photographic documentation highlighted the numerous ways in which individuals traverse a city. For PQ15 the walkers had been mostly foreign artists however over a longer performance period it would be interesting to also invite local residents to take part in the companion role to further explore how the inflatable architecture can alter ones orientation.

*Stroll* effectively extended the contemporary thinking of the passerby in relation to mobility and our daily negotiation of the people around us and the spaces we traverse. It is a nuanced artwork that provokes varied responses both from the companions inside the pods and those who encounter them.



## DAVID CROSS AND CAMERON BISHOP IN CONVERSATION

**Cameron:** The gaze I inhabit comes packaged with a list of tickets to events that others are just locked out of. It goes without saying that this comes straight out of cultural theory 101, but if that gaze hints at the way we look at and construct the world and we extend it to what we look from (a very particular body), much contemporary art, in which the viewer is thrown into action, assumes a privileged mobility. I for one can engage with all of your works as an able bodied, notionally, white male around six foot one with an average build and athletic capacity. In the participatory works you create you provoke the participant, offering her a variety of scenarios that require different kinds of athleticism. The bodies are compelled to slip, catch, jump, fall, pump, crash, bash, smack and whack, among other things. How do you account for the atypical body?

**David:** I have always been interested in the idea of constraint and how through architectural and sculptural forms I can create a specific frame that delineates the potential for an embodied response by the audience. Eliciting a strongly physical encounter with the performative/object scenarios is a key part of this, as I ask people to employ assorted physical attributes including balance, climbing, negotiating unstable surfaces, stamina, core strength etc. In many ways these are athletic attributes and may help you to negotiate the artwork but they are not necessarily going to give you an advantage like they will in sporting contests. While sport is to varying degrees focused on alignment of physical and mental co-ordination, it is also about beating your opponent, running faster than them, hitting more aces and cross-court winners. I am interested in constructing scenarios that frustrate and block pure athleticism tempering physical engagement with cognitive barriers. By limiting vision, making a surface slippery, or accentuating the potential for phobias to be brought to the fore, the works neuter the performance of a pure

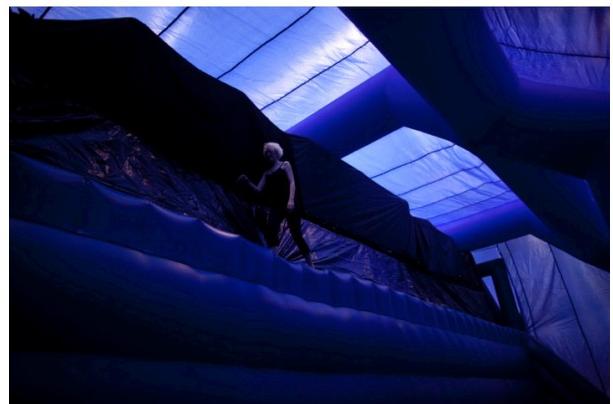
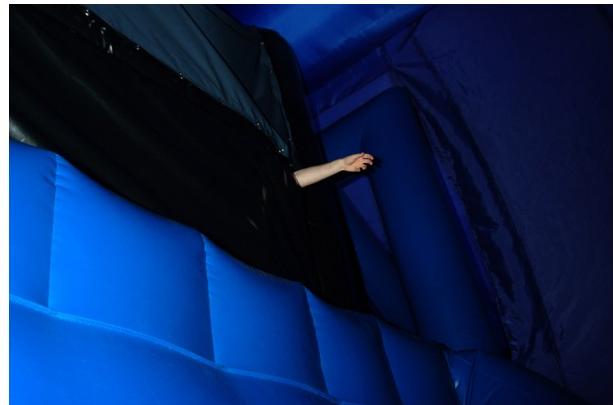
athleticism. In a work like *Pump*, which requires the audience to use their foot to keep the structure inflated, too much power and strength will result in a very sore head. Likewise in *Skyball*, which is a sport of sorts, layers of clear vinyl and netting hamper the player's vision. Because the works often scramble conventional hierarchies of dexterity and capacity there is perhaps a different focus on the atypical body. I am interested in shifting the terms around which different bodies and subjectivities are able to negotiate overtly physical phenomena.



**Cameron:** So what we conceive of, as conventional athleticism becomes bunk. In a rebuff to the spectacular culture of late capitalism, numerous artists have given themselves the brief to produce the *other* in the spectator. Your work straddles an intriguing line in that it, at first encounter, is striking in its colour, form and occupation of space, but it is on closer inspection that it invokes a phobia, or presses the participant to make a decision to move, one way or another — *Hold* comes to mind here. By asking the participant to latch onto an arm protruding from a wall, a phobia may be revealed, but so too a political consciousness and potential ethical dilemma? Can one trust the *other*?

**David:** The possibility of negotiating trust within a participatory art context is certainly something I have consistently sought to get at. There are numerous projects where the audience is invited to place themselves in a space of physical or psychological precarity and trust that I or another performer will not let go of them at a great height or damage them in some way. The vulnerability of this uncertain accord is accentuated by the partial nature of the encounter. The audience never sees my entire body but perhaps one arm, an eye or my hands. I am concealed within the inflatable structures. Judgments based on who I am, how I appear, are negated and the audience have to suspend the visual vetting process and rely on instinct and volition. In this sense the partial nature of the encounter with the fragmented body part is deliberately uncanny potentially leading to the activation of related phobias about loss or assorted traumas. I am especially interested in how irrational fear transforms our capacity for both decision making and physical dexterity making basic tasks and movements harder. The limiting of vision is key to the process. As good horror movies reveal, the limiting of vision highlights a sense of intense dread that we are somehow defenseless and thus dangerously incapacitated. I do not remove vision so much as make it contingent and provisional. For the audience in my work in most instances it is no more useful as a source of information than touch or sound leading to a greater equivalence between scopic and haptic modes of knowing.

While the result of this process might elicit phobic responses of one kind or another, I am at the same time profoundly curious about the possibility of an intimate encounter. How might it be possible to exchange an unguarded moment, a connection with a stranger simply through linking arms, touching their feet, holding them in space. My use of inflatable architectural forms and the assorted challenges they pose together with the presence of my partial body, serve in part as a ruse to activate small moments of transitivity.



**Cameron:** Is it a key aspect of your work that you seek to activate in the audience/participant recognition of self as always partial. Is there an ambition to transform the participant through a delimitation of their athletic ability, for better or worse, outside of conventional societal or sporting rules? And in that decisive/transitive/athletic moment, is there a redemptive quality to the work because of its fleeting, as opposed to frozen, nature?

**David:** Certainly in relation to the first question, I am interested in shaking out a critical reflection on the instability of subjectivity. To that extent, the idea of the partial self and partial body oscillating wildly is always there in different forms. I find myself always trying to calibrate how through performance and installation it is possible to activate a heightened level of self-reflexivity in an audience member. Clearly this is never straightforward and always different for every person who engages. To varying degrees most people are inured to self-reflection often wary of opening their own bespoke Pandora's box of unconscious fragilities. We all are master builders of an impressive armory of distancing devices with our own distinctive firewalls. I guess I am always looking for the blind spot, maybe even only a fleeting moment when the combination of artistic frame (inflatable quasi bouncy castle, pleasurable participatory experience, quest into an unknown space) is short-circuited by something unexpected. Returning to the uncanny, I see that as an operation that opens up the possibility of penetrating the firewall and allowing for an unguarded moment to occur. Whether you call that a liminal space or third space or whatever, for me it at least partially opens the portal and establishes the pre-conditions for disabling our distancing mechanisms. Of course it does not always work: some portals are barricaded shut; and the artworks may simply fail to fire or any front. But at the same time I want to nudge or prick what Julia Kristeva calls 'an awareness of our own foreignness' and in the process coax a degree of self-reflexivity. To claim a redemptive quality in navigating

the work is probably a bridge too far. Certainly in some of the works there is the pleasure of getting through, of having knocked off the ordeal and met the challenge and this is accentuated by the element of surprise. The works mostly do not signpost what will transpire and because of that there is a beautiful lack of preparedness for the encounter. There is no doubt some pleasure to be had in successfully navigating the unexpected and negotiating individual thresholds.



**Cameron:** We live in denial of the foreigner within due to the (often feigned) dexterous self-regard we bring to our social and spatial encounters. You, as the literal foreign body in your own work, inviting the participant to pump, breath, hold, slide or catch, deny that self-assurance, not only to the viewer but also to yourself. Framed at a psychosocial level the denial of the foreigner within plays out in all kinds of ways in our treatment of those others who are seen to breach our borders, at a personal, political and national level. The work you create, in this context, may be seen as an interrogation of the western subject's conventional experience of territories, from the body, to the museum and to the nation. As you suggest the physical and cognitive thresholds you give to the participant invite the unguarded moment, the other side of which prompts the viewer to ponder their physical relations to others, as fragmented, fragile beings, but key to this is you, the artist, who presents as partial, and foreign inside these objects. How are these objects extensions of your own body, and your own athleticism?

**David:** Marina Abramovic has suggested that the future of the art experience lies in the removal of the object leaving only an unmediated engagement between artist and audience. I think that is absurd! Such an approach not only relies on an incredibly idealised understanding of inter-personal power relations between artist and audience, it does not take into account the complex mechanisms of distancing we have been talking about. While my utilisation of the object is certainly in part about a fantastical extension of the body as you suggest, they are also framing mechanisms that seek to delimit an individual's instinct to distance or protect himself or herself from an intimate encounter with another person. For me, the object is a fundamental modality that significantly enhances the potential for that all elusive unguarded moment. To achieve or come close to such an affect I need to rely on a number of devices all of which revolve around confusion. By developing contexts that align sport and performance art

or pleasurable, fun activities such as negotiating 'bouncy castles' with phobic architectural spaces, I seek to blur both signification and identification.

Curiously in some ways the objects are also highly idealised extensions of my own body. They are seamless, monochromatic, shiny and smooth in a way my body most definitely isn't. The forms are fantastical appendages that camouflage both my and the participants alterity. They allow for a sideways encounter rather than a direct one that while prefacing an examination of the partial, aim to speak very much to the whole of inter-personal exchange. The strength and resilience of the objects made from heavy duty, high shine PVC is also in contract to the limitations of my body. In constantly re-staging a performative encounter over a number of hours as in the work *Pump*, or days in *Pause*, the objects remain pristine while my body slowly wears down. My capacity to perform consistently and with an iterative regularity for each audience member over time becomes a factor of athleticism as I try and match the strength and consistency of the inflatables. That I cannot sustain the required athleticism is a measure of how the objects are very much exaggerated and unattainable extensions of my body.

First published in *Drain Journal* special Issue on Athleticism, 2015.  
<http://drainmag.com/david-cross-in-conversation-with-cameron-bishop/>



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## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

David Cross works across performance, installation, video and photography. His practice brings together performance art and object-based environments, focusing on relationships between pleasure, the grotesque and phobia. His works often involve inflatable objects and structures that draw audiences into unexpected situations and dialogues as Cross seeks to explore contemporary experiences and understandings of participation in art.

Increasingly he has begun to work in the public sphere developing works that navigate the relationship between sport, collective decision-making and sensory deprivation. Cross has exhibited extensively in New Zealand, Australia, Eastern Europe, France, Canada and the United Kingdom. Cross also writes on contemporary art and his curatorial projects include *One Day Sculpture* (2008/09), co-directed with Claire Doherty, *Iteration:Again* (2011) and *Treatment* (2015). He is Professor of Visual Arts at Deakin University, Melbourne.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Anna Brown for her design *elan vital*, all the writers, commissioners and curators, Shaun Waugh for the image pimping and all the photographers who braved the elements and assorted flying bodies. Special thanks to Martin Patrick for trying to tie the frayed shoe laces together and to Cameron Bishop for his best Michael Parkinson impersonation. Fiona Lee has had the unfortunate task of trying to organise this publication and her care, attention and perennial good spirits have made her a primo research assistant.

All of the inflatable structures in this book were made by Canvasland International who are the pride of Levin in Horowhenua, Aotearoa/New Zealand. Without the exacting standards and extraordinary capacity to make objects that were not quite 'off the shelf' this book would be especially thin and devoid of colour and dirigibility. Owner Brendan Duffy and designer Wade Kenchington by all rights should be getting royalties for their respective contribution and both have been a joy to work with.

Many of the works were supported by and made possible by generous research funding from firstly Massey University in Aotearoa/New Zealand and more recently Deakin University in Australia.

Thanks also to the many performers and invigilators who generously gave their time and energy to activate the works.

Heartfelt props to many loyal and generous friends and supporters: Heather Galbraith, Maddie Leach, Claire Doherty, David Clegg, Ashley Cox and Philipa Tocker, Richard and

Bill Cross, Jo Mair, Heidi Kenyon, Amelia Jones, Kircha Kaechele, Natalie Holtsbaum, Rebecca Sinclair, Paul Gazzola, Lynda Roberts, Simon Mark and Caroline McDonald, Mark Pennings, Anne Loxley, Vikki McInnes, Rebecca Coates, Natalie King, Stuart Foster, Jem Noble, Mick Douglas, Eugene Hanson, Jenny Gillam, Jondi Keane, Gary Bridle, James Oliver, Brad Spolding, David Thomas, Karen McCarthy, Jan Nelson, Shane McGrath, Tim Spite, Angharad Wynne-Jones, Mary Knights, Blair French, Adrian Heathfield, Sue and Rob Gardiner, Charlotte Huddleston, Sophie Jerram, Mark Amery, assorted masseurs of the world, Bec Conroy, Felicity Fenner, Deanna Smart, Margaret Farmer, Eileen Joy and the team at Punctum, Brian Ritchie, Tomas Jonsson, the late, great, Pam Zeppelin, Marco Marcon, Lisa Grocott, Stuart Koop, Mark Webb, Toni Ross, Simon Morris, Mia and Claudia Morris, Matthew Allen, Nicola Shuttleworth, Andy Thomson, John Hurell, Frances Barrett, John DiStefano, Mick Wilson, Paul O'Neill, Toby Huddlestone, James Newitt, Kylie Johnson, Lucy Bleach, Michael Edwards, Lucy Rollins, Catherine Bell, Anne Scott Wilson, Nadia Cusimano, Monique Redmond and Margaret Colligan and most especially my beautiful test pilot Edie Cross and life partner in crime Ellie Boekman.

Special acknowledgement to those who came off second best and graciously accepted that art can occasionally require substantial medical treatment. Wherever you are I salute you!

## PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

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Steven Rowe

Images courtesy City Gallery, Wellington

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Christopher Braddock / Bec Dean

### **Re-tard**

Steven Rowe

### **Receding Plane**

Steven Rowe

### **Hold**

Alex Davies / Steven Rowe

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Shaun Waugh

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Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

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A Campbelltown Arts Centre Project

### **Stroll**

Stuart Foster / Keely McCann.

Images courtesy New Zealand Pavilion,  
Prague Quadrennial 2015

### **Drift**

David Cross / Paul Patterson

Images courtesy City of Sydney

## IMPRINT

© David Cross, 2016

Published by Punctum Books  
Earth, Milky Way  
[www.punctumbooks.com](http://www.punctumbooks.com)

Editor: Fiona Lee  
Publication design: Anna Brown,  
Wellington, New Zealand

First Published in 2016  
Second ePDF edition 2018  
ISBN-13: 978-1-947447-58-5

All opinions expressed within this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily of the publishers.

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Cover Image: *Bounce*, 2006  
The Block, Queensland University of Technology

A record of this publication is held in  
The National Library of Australia and the  
State Library of Victoria.

Printed by Everbest Printing Company, China





**/ Air Supplied**  
examines  
the work of  
Australian-  
based artist  
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Working across performance/participatory art and object-based environments, Cross has developed a unique body of work that focuses on relationships between pleasure, the grotesque and phobia. His curious architectural structures, often resembling children's fun houses, draw participants into physically and psychologically complex scenarios. While often large in scale, these structures at the same time create a framework around which ideas of intimacy and haptic experience can be negotiated and challenged. Since 2011, Cross has begun to work increasingly in the public sphere developing works that navigate the relationship between sport, collective decision making and sensory deprivation. Capturing work since 2005 produced in Europe, Eastern Europe, North America, and Australasia, the text features a survey essay by New Zealand-based academic Dr Martin Patrick, an interview with the artist and eleven commissioned essays on each of the artworks. The publication also includes a separate booklet of field notes by the artist, capturing reflections on each of the works.





Cross, David

*Air Supplied*

punctum books, 2018

ISBN: 9781947447585

<https://punctumbooks.com/titles/air-supplied/>

<https://www.doi.org/10.21983/P3.0201.1.00>